



Building SoHo in Shenzhen: The territorial politics of gentrification and state making in China

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the territorial politics of gentrification at China's rural-urban interface. Drawing on empirical fieldwork in Shenzhen, it is shown that gentrification in China can be seen as a state-making strategy deployed by the government to consolidate territorial control and extend the reach of the state. Unlike conventional accounts of gentrification which assumes the universality of formal, property-based land tenure, this paper highlights how the prevalence of informality and non-privatized property rights in the post-socialist context produces distinct dynamics of gentrification and state-society interactions at the rural fringe of Chinese cities. While gentrification is often seen as a place-making strategy espoused by entrepreneurial states to attract investment and bolster consumption, it also functions as a state-building tactic for recovering and materializing land rights where property rights are uncertain, under-defined and contested. In the process, uneven patterns of direct and indirect displacement can be observed which reflected a more complex reality than the class replacement thesis commonly found in traditional gentrification.

1. Introduction

The planetary expansion of urbanization has brought new dynamics to the study of gentrification. A notion first coined in the 1960s (Glass, 1964), gentrification research has traditionally focused on inner city areas, where the influx of middle-class populations into working class neighbourhoods brought housing prices up and precipitated the displacement of low-income residents (Smith, 2002; Newman and Wyly, 2006; Watt, 2008). While retaining basic similarities such as landscape change, capital reinvestment, population in-migration and class-based displacement, gentrification is now being observed in a diverse variety of contexts. Recent calls to “decolonize the gentrification literature from Euro-American perspectives” have contributed to the incorporation of developing countries in mainstream gentrification research (Lees, 2012, p. 164). Meanwhile, the need to extend the spatial horizon of gentrification studies has directed attention to places beyond the city, from the peri-urban (Hudalah et al., 2016) to the wilderness (Darling, 2005; Smith et al., 2018), and spawned a burgeoning literature on rural gentrification (see Phillips, 2004). Together, these studies have begun to shed light on the nuanced dynamics of gentrification outside of Western urban realities.

By examining a case of gentrification at the rural-urban interface of post-socialist China, this paper draws attention to the territorial politics

that underlies gentrification. Urban transformation in the past four decades has often been attributed to the entrepreneurial turn in governance, a trend observable in Western cities since the 1980s (Hall and Hubbard, 1998; Harvey, 1989). As a result of increased capital mobility, governments have become more eager in capturing investments by rendering their cities attractive to business and consumers, through the adoption of place promotion and city branding strategies aimed at enhancing the competitiveness of their urban spaces (Jessop, 1997; Brenner, 2004). Gentrification is often seen under such contexts as an urban strategy espoused by entrepreneurial states to bolster consumption and extract revenue.

At the peri-urban regions of the Global South, where pre-existing land arrangements and rapid urbanization have contributed to the prevalence of informality and non-privatized property regimes, however, gentrification concerns more than the capitalization of ground rent but involves also the territorialization of state power and the extension of the reach of the state. It is not just the need to capture footloose capital that incentivized governments to invest in the built environment; urbanization and land-based development also played a crucial role in consolidating political authority (Hsing, 2010; Wong, 2015). Indeed, the revenue imperative and territorial prerogative of states are not mutually exclusive of one another but rather intertwined: It is effective territorial control that enables states to exploit resources

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and appropriate land rent for revenue generation, which in turn sustains the operation of those very administrative and coercive apparatuses that allow states to project power over distance.

This paper examines the politics of land control in the gentrification of an urban village in Shenzhen, China. A village known for the mass production of imitation art in the 1990s, Dafen has been the target of intensive state-led gentrification in recent years as it is remade into a landscape geared towards tourism and urban consumption. Featuring creative industries, cultural entertainment, as well as high-value commercial and residential developments, the ambition was to create a “world urban art region that rivals London’s South Bank and New York’s SoHo” (Administrative Office of Dafen Oil Painting Village, 2018). Drawing on fieldwork and interviews, this paper makes three main observations. First, far from being a purely entrepreneurial strategy of place-making, gentrification also unfolds as a territorial project of state building in Dafen. Due to socialist legacy, land ownership in China is constituted by the dual regimes of state-owned urban land and collective-owned rural land. The bifurcation of tenure systems has given rise to widespread informality at the rural-urban interface, and gentrification has been deployed in this context of fuzzy property rights as a state building strategy whereby the state enhances not only its capacity to extract value from land but also its territorial power vis-à-vis competing claimants of land and titles.

Secondly, gentrification is shown to be a dynamic and contentious process that is mutually constituted by state and non-state practices. While the production of a gentrified landscape in Dafen helped build the local state, it also empowered and incentivized villagers to stake their own spatial and material claims. The active role of villagers calls for a nuanced representation of bottom-up agency and resourcefulness in gentrification processes that is often overlooked in conventional accounts.

Last but not least, China’s unique land tenure system has given rise to distinct class dynamics in gentrification-induced displacement. Unlike residents squeezed out by high rent, gentrification has been a class-making process for Dafen’s villagers who were able to capitalize on their property rights and evolve into a petit rentier class. At the same time, however, the extension of gentrifying processes from Dafen through new-build commercial and residential developments is precipitating the dislocation of residents in surrounding neighbourhoods. For the artist community, the state’s campaign to turn Dafen from a production centre to a tourist destination for cultural consumption has encouraged the in-migration of high-paid artists and business owners, but it has also displaced those low-wage imitation art workers whose labour-intensive production has helped build Dafen’s success in the first place. Rather than being a straightforward process of class replacement, therefore, gentrification at China’s rural-urban interface is producing uneven outcomes where social groups are differentially co-opted or excluded.

2. Gentrification and the state: From entrepreneurial place-making to territorial state-building

The concept of gentrification has been used to describe such myriad processes of neighbourhood change that some see it as at risk of conceptual overstretch (Atkinson, 2008). This paper views gentrification as consisting of four defining characteristics as outlined by Davidson and Lees (2005), namely: the reinvestment of capital; the social upgrading of the neighbourhood; changes in landscape and outlook; and the direct or indirect displacement of low-income groups.

While the earlier scholarship on gentrification has been preoccupied with the debate between production and consumption explanations, more researchers are now highlighting the role of the state in facilitating gentrification. In Western societies, observations have been made regarding the return of state intervention in gentrification. While the process was largely market-driven in the 1980s, the following decades have seen local governments assisting gentrification in a more

assertive manner (Hackworth and Smith, 2000; Atkinson, 2002). The revived role of the state has been associated with neoliberal transformations towards post-Keynesian modes of governance, which encourage public-private partnerships and promote the formation of entrepreneurial local states (Harvey, 1989). The devolution of fiscal responsibilities has placed pressure on governments “to actively pursue redevelopment and gentrification as ways of generating tax revenue” (Hackworth and Smith, 2000, p. 464). For Wacquant (2008: 199), heightened state involvement in gentrification points to nothing less than “the shifting role of the state from provider of social support for lower-income populations to supplier of business services and amenities for middle- and upper-class urbanites”.

In non-Western contexts, the state has played a preponderant role in promoting gentrification. In some aspects, state-led gentrification in developing economies bears similarities to processes observed in Western contexts. The turn to entrepreneurialism and the imperative to create business-friendly environments for attracting investments have compelled governments to engage extensively in redevelopment projects (He and Wu, 2005). The need to generate revenue through the accumulation of land rents under conditions of fiscal constraint has also been identified as a primary driver of gentrification (La Grange and Pretorius, 2016; Jou et al., 2016). There are also important differences, however. While in the West the increased participation of the state in gentrification has been associated with the neoliberal turn, in many newly industrialized economies strong authoritarian states have been working purposively with capital to generate growth under the model of developmental statism (Lees et al., 2016). In the Global East, the heavy involvement of Asian developmental states in gentrification is underlined by the predominance of state control over key land assets (Shin et al., 2016). In China and market economies such as Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan, the strong presence of governments in land ownership buttresses their power in undertaking redevelopment projects (Chang, 2016; La Grange and Pretorius, 2016). Rather than being “simply a function of neoliberal states”, therefore, it has been observed that “gentrification itself is a function of capitalist states of all guises” (Shin et al., 2016, p. 457).

This paper builds on these existing studies in highlighting how the state intervenes in assisting gentrification. Specifically, it enriches the literature by pointing to the territorial dimension of political power and by furthering theorization of how property rights regimes intersect with the dynamics of gentrification. Going beyond conceptualizations of the state that focus on political economy, such as neoliberal or entrepreneurial states, this paper draws attention to the state as a territorial entity.

Securing the territorial reach of the state is a crucial aspect of state making (Tilly, 1984). State power can be conceived of as the ability to “project power over distance” (Herbst, 2014, p. 12). The territorial reach of formal authority is a key attribute of stateness (O’Donnell, 1993). The Weberian definition of the state describes it as a “compulsory organization with a territorial basis” that possesses an administration capable of claiming monopoly over the legitimate deployment of force (Weber, 1978, p. 56). By securing access to a territory through boundary restrictions, “the content of a territory can be manipulated and its character designed” (Taylor, 1994, p. 151). It is not only the case that “those with authority can territorialize”, but territorialization itself establishes authority (Rasmussen and Lund, 2018, p. 389). Indeed, “the first imperative of all state-building activity is to exert control over a territory: without a relatively secure central base from which to operate, there can be no state” (Strauss, 1998, p. 3).

While attention to the territorial state is often related to discussions of national sovereignty and external boundaries in the international system of nation-states, an emerging body of scholarship is highlighting the *internal* dimension of territorialization. Rather than seeing sovereign power as unitary and monolithic, the internal territorialization literature treats state formation and sovereignty as a matter of degree (Lund, 2011). Far from being a straightforward, *de jure* claim over

territory, state formation is seen as “an institutional competition” between a range of state and non-state actors where “the ability to define and enforce property rights and political subjectivities is fragmented” (Lund, 2011, p. 887). In terms of territorial control, the state is not the only claimant of land but must “wrestle with contending demands and actions of individuals, communities and other sub-state groups who want authority, jurisdiction or control” (Peluso, 2005, p. 2). Legitimated by customary and ancestral rights and other sources of social power such as lineage, different socio-political groups and informal institutions also invoke territorial logics in their claims of authority (Sikor and Lund, 2009; Kan, 2020). These local territorialities often co-exist with state claims or even pre-date them, resulting in overlapping and conflicting territorial claims (Wadley, 2003).

Viewed in this light, the state can be seen as “a territorial project” where the processes of state building and territorial control are mutually constitutive of one another (Hsing, 2010, p. 8). The capability of non-state actors to appropriate space and exercise land control implies that state territoriality is often uneven, contingent on a combination of factors including, not least, the ability of states to police infringements and enforce their own claims. The territorial power of states is thus actively gained and acquired, and is constantly reconfigured through contestation and renegotiation with societal actors.

3. Gentrification and state building at the rural-urban interface

This paper focuses on contested territorialities and state building processes at the rural-urban interface. In the Western literature, the rural-urban interface is often conceived of as a “transitional” zone that extends from the boundaries of built-up areas, where urban uses of land gradually give way to rural uses (Hoggart, 2005; Gallent et al., 2006; Gant et al., 2011). Due to the ubiquity of intermingled land uses and the absence of effective land use planning, the rural-urban interface has been characterized as “planning’s last frontier” (Griffiths, 1994, p. 14).

It has been argued that the characteristics of the interface zone in non-Western contexts directly challenge neat conceptual separations of what might constitute “rural” and “urban” activities as postulated in Western paradigms of urban transition (McGee, 1991). Located at the edge of global cities and expanding metropolitan regions, the rural-urban interface is a frontier of circuits of capital that produces different spatial economies (Bunnell et al., 2006). In their work on peri-urban gentrification in Indonesia, Hudalah et al. (2016, p. 605) point out how peri-urban areas are “cross-jurisdictional areas with unclear authority”, where the condition of “maximum flexibility of rules and institutional vacuum” attracted local growth coalitions seeking to profit off weak enforcement of planning regulations.

This paper highlights how the rural-urban interface is the site where territorial dynamics play out amidst widespread informality and competing claims to land. This is especially true of post-socialist societies, where property rights in land are “fuzzy”, vague and ambiguous (Verdery, 1999). The transition from state socialism towards market economy has not precipitated a full-fledged shift from public to private ownership, but rather created overlapping ownership claims and bundles of powers where the use and revenue rights over a certain resource is contested between different parties (Sturgeon and Sikor, 2004).

In China, de-collectivization and the introduction of market mechanisms in land management have complicated the assessment of rights over land. In theory, urban land is owned by the state while rural land is owned by village collectives. In reality, ownership rights are less clearly defined, and in some cases, deliberately left ambiguous (Ho, 2001). Contending property claims are most prevalent at the rural-urban interface, where state ownership and collective ownership exist side by side and where urbanization processes have blurred the boundaries between the two property types (Kan, 2019). This makes it difficult for the government to exert its control and extract revenue from these areas – for example, in urban villages, the expropriation of rural land by the state has created conditions where the government has

requisitioned ownership rights, but on the ground, villagers have continued to exercise use rights and claim the revenue derived from land use.

In the scholarship on China, local state power is often taken to be a straightforward function of the degree to which administrative and fiscal authorities are devolved. The decentralization of powers by the central government has been equated with increased state power at the sub-national level. Nonetheless, as Hsing (2010, p. 54) points out, “while municipal governments enjoy the delegated authority to manage urban land and coordinate the land market, it remains an open question whether municipal governments will be able to convert such delegated authority into the effective exercise of territorial power”.

In this context, gentrification can be seen as a strategy for state actors to actively assert land control and to define and defend the reach of the state. Given the ambiguity of rights, the implementation of state-led gentrification enables the government to build and consolidate both its regulatory presence and its capacity to extract revenue. By intervening to remake neighbourhoods and producing gentrified landscapes, the state assumes planning control over territory and translates its nominal land rights into actual authority. As the empirical case study demonstrates, the reinvestment of capital coordinated by the state produced new-build developments that materially transformed the designated territory according to state planning visions. The expanded presence of the administrative state in implementing the neighborhood upgrade further facilitated the deployment of regulatory force, equipping the state with the means to enforce land use control and to sanction infringements. Gentrification also formalized property rights, enabling the state to appropriate income from the development of land which in turn furnished it with fiscal resources to further state-building goals.

By center-staging the territorial dimension, this paper argues that gentrification at the rural-urban interface is more than a place-making policy adopted by entrepreneurial governments to attract investment under neoliberal conditions. Rather, it is also a state-building tactic aimed at recovering and consolidating territorial control where property rights are uncertain, under-defined and contested. The rest of the paper looks at how such dynamics have unfolded in Shenzhen.

4. Methodology

The case study focuses on the gentrification processes unfolding in an urban village located in what was formerly the rural suburb of Shenzhen, a city that has experienced rapid urbanization since the 1980s when China adopted market reforms. Dafen was a rural community of about three hundred villagers of Hakka ethnicity. The village experienced dramatic change in the 1990s and 2000s when investments from Hong Kong and subsequent state intervention transformed it first into an imitation art production centre and more recently a “tourism town” and “international arts community”. Dafen is currently home to hundreds of galleries and art-related businesses that employ thousands of artists and workers.

Extant studies of Dafen have focused on the cultural economy dimension relating to the making of art clusters in contemporary China (Li et al., 2014; Wang and Li, 2017). Building on these works, this paper delves deeper by shedding light on the territorial politics that underlies Dafen’s creative gentrification. It draws attention to the territorial prerogatives of the local state – specifically the municipal, district, and sub-district levels of government – and its role in creating the conditions that facilitated Dafen’s transformation.

Empirical data was collected through field visits, interviews and archival research. Fieldwork was carried out in two phases: between 2011 and 2013 and between 2018 and 2019. This paper draws on 42 interviews conducted during fieldwork, involving local officials and planners (n = 10) as well as villagers and members of Dafen’s art community such as painters, art workers, business owners and investors (n = 32). Supplementary interviews were conducted with local

academics and journalists to obtain further insights on land use policy and territorial dynamics in Shenzhen. Policy documents published by the municipal, district and sub-district governments were consulted for archival data.

Findings from the case study are presented in four sections. [Section 5](#) provides the structural context by examining informality and land policy in Shenzhen. [Sections 6 and 7](#) shed light on the mechanisms of state-led gentrification as they unfolded in Dafen, while the displacement effects are examined in [Section 8](#).

5. Land and territorial politics in Shenzhen

Designated a Special Economic Zone at the inception of China's market reform, the city of Shenzhen has witnessed rapid industrialization in the past four decades. While urban growth brought transformational change to Shenzhen's once predominantly rural landscape, informality has prevailed in the form of "urban villages", pockets of rurality that have become incorporated into the metropolitan landscape.

Urban villages are by-products of China's dual ownership land system, which separates state-owned urban land from collectively-owned rural land. In the reform era, the increased demand for land for industrial and infrastructural construction led to intensifying processes of expropriation, whereby rural land was converted into state-owned urban land through government requisitions. The loss of land to successive expropriations reduced the physical size of villages, while the use of expropriated land for construction gradually urbanized their surroundings. Over time these villages became enclaves within the expanding city, woven into the urban fabric but with distinct claims over land and property.

In the 1990s, the Shenzhen government deployed its regulatory power in the attempt to place all land under state control. It issued the Temporary Regulations on the Urbanization of Villages in Shenzhen Economic Zone, which transferred the ownership rights of rural land located within the economic zone from village collectives to the state ([Wang et al., 2009](#)). The land right collection process was further extended outside of the economic zone in the 2000s ([Urban Planning Land and Resources Commission of Shenzhen Municipality, 2017](#)). By 2004, all land in Shenzhen was theoretically state-owned. The conversion of all land to state ownership enabled the government, as the sole landlord, to centrally coordinate land use and profit singularly from the development of land.

The nominal transfer of rights was not materialized in practice, however. On the ground, large tracts of rural land remained under the control of villagers, who appropriated it for private housing construction and rent extraction. The influx of migrant workers from inland China created huge demand for low-cost accommodation in urban centres, and this furnished urban villagers with the opportunity to capture income through the provision of cheap housing. Using their housing plots, villagers built multi-storey apartments and leased subdivided flats to migrant workers. They also rented storefront space to tenants for operating small trades and businesses. Villagers described the change in their main economic activity as a shift from "planting fields" (*zhongtian*) to "planting houses" (*zhongfang*). It is estimated that rental revenue made up 60 percent of village households' monthly income ([Hao et al., 2011](#)).

The prevalence of informality in urban villages undermined the territorial reach of the state. Although it is the de facto owner, the government often lacks effective control over land occupied by village collectives ([Tang and Chung, 2002](#); [Webster et al. 2016](#); [Wu et al., 2013](#)). Villagers' practices of local territorializations including illegal constructions frequently breach state planning regulations. Previously, the wholesale demolition and reconstruction of urban villages were commonly deployed by local states to reclaim territorial control ([Wu et al., 2013](#)). Because this involves significant fiscal investments and has engendered resistance against dispossession, the remaking of urban

villages without demolishing entire neighbourhoods is now increasingly pursued by local states as a territorial strategy. Rather than casting out the village community, villagers are co-opted into the state's project to refurbish neighbourhoods ([Kan, 2019](#)). From a state building perspective, this approach allows the government to extend territorial control while minimizing political and economic costs.

Culture-based gentrification has been a popular method for such territorial interventions at the rural-urban interface. The use of culture as a place-making strategy has been widely noted in the literature ([Jessop and Sum, 2000](#); [Evans, 2003, 2005](#); [Eizenberg and Cohen, 2015](#)). Seen as a solution to the post-industrial condition ([Zukin, 1995](#)), the arts are used to theme spaces to improve city image and bolster consumption, with the cultural industries serving as a key economic foundation for revitalization projects ([Smith, 2012](#)). In contrast to earlier bottom-up processes of change – where artists move to a neighbourhood, refurbish the buildings and thereby set the stage for gentrification, governments now play a proactive role in selecting neighbourhoods for gentrification and making use of cultural capital to engineer growth ([Grodach et al., 2018](#)). Such top-down approaches are increasingly common in East Asia, where the deployment of creative and cultural industries is viewed as an effective strategy for revitalizing inner city areas and former industrial sites ([He and Wang, 2018](#); [Kim, 2017](#); [Hassen and Giovanardi, 2018](#); [He, 2017](#); [Yin et al., 2015](#)). In China, the lucrative nexus between culture and capital has contributed to the rise of cultural districts and "elite enclaves" in both urban and suburban areas ([Li et al., 2014](#); [Zielke and Waibel, 2014](#); [Zhang, 2017](#); [Wang, 2009](#); [Wang and Lau, 2009](#)).

The establishment of cultural districts and industrial parks is more than a place promotion strategy, however: it provides an important avenue for the government to secure land supply for new developments. In Shenzhen, the government released the Opinions on Implementing the Construction of Cultural Industry Bases in 2005 to encourage the development of cultural clusters. With urbanization continuing apace, Shenzhen has been suffering from acute land shortage, with as little as 30 square kilometres of usable land in the city centre. It is estimated that the city will need to acquire 40 square kilometres of land per year through redevelopment to make room for new infrastructural projects ([Chow, 2012](#)). The need to secure land compels the government to materialize its nominal rights over land occupied by village collectives, and culture-led gentrification provides a means of doing so.

6. Gentrifying Dafen: From industrial production to cultural consumption

Dafen village is located in Buji sub-district under the jurisdiction of Longgang district government. Prior to its conversion into an urban district, Longgang was part of the rural suburbs that surrounded the original Special Economic Zone of Shenzhen. The district is home to some 90 of the 300 urban villages in Shenzhen. Culture-led development has been used by Longgang government to gentrify a series of urban villages within its jurisdiction, and Dafen was the pioneering development. Dafen's transformation can be divided into two stages: spontaneous in-migration and evolution into an imitation art production centre in the 1990s, followed by state-led gentrification into a cultural district geared towards consumption and tourism from the mid-2000s onwards.

Prior to state intervention, Dafen had begun its development into a hub for the mass production of artwork through bottom-up, organic processes. In the late 1980s, an investor from Hong Kong chose the village as a base for the production of copy paintings. Also known as imitation art, copy paintings refer to a genre where painters reproduce well-known artworks, usually Western classical paintings, by hand through labour-intensive processes. Capitalizing on cheap rent and labour, workshops were set up in Dafen where low-wage art workers (*huagong*) were hired to produce copy paintings on an industrial scale. Efficiency was achieved through the mechanical division of labour



Fig. 1. View of refurbished Dafen. Author, 2012.

along production lines (*liushui xian*), with each worker trained and assigned to paint a part of the picture. Dafen's location next to a highway and its proximity to Luohu district allowed finished works to be conveniently transported across the border to Hong Kong, where paintings were shipped to overseas markets.

Throughout the 1990s, Dafen experienced strong export-led growth by producing low-price copies of Western paintings and other decorative arts. The agglomeration of workshops and arts-related businesses contributed to the in-migration of art workers, painters, and dealers. By the year 2000, there were approximately 1,500 painters in the village (Wang and Li, 2017, p. 720). The population inflow created a boom for the village's rental housing economy. Villagers rented storefront space to newcomers, who set up galleries to sell paintings and art supplies, as well as flats in the upper stories of their apartments as spaces for workshops and accommodation. As business prospered, some village households began to extend the height of their buildings beyond legal limits to capture more rental income. While the official restriction on building height was three stories, rural apartments as high as eight stories have been built by villagers (Interview and fieldwork, May 2018) (Fig. 1).

The state-led gentrification of Dafen via top-down policy processes began in the early 2000s, following the formal resumption of land control by the state. In 2004, land in the village was officially converted to state ownership while Dafen itself was designated an urban neighbourhood (*shequ*) and placed under urban administration. Instead of demolishing villagers' apartments and engaging in wholesale redevelopment, the government capitalized on the nascent cultural economy and adopted the strategy of creative gentrification to co-opt the village community and reassert its territorial authority.

Gentrification has been characterized as the "class remake" of urban landscapes (Smith, 1996, p. 39). The social and neighbourhood upgrade of Dafen was conceived in terms of its transformation from an industrial landscape of mass painting production to an international cultural cluster and tourism destination. This entails a shift from "low-end copy paintings" (*diduan henghua*) to "high-end original creation" (*gaoduan yuanchuang*) – a replacement of lower-skilled copy painters with artists engaged in high-value original creation – as well as the redevelopment of Dafen's landscape from one centred on mass production to one geared towards cultural consumption. According to state discourse, the village is to be developed into an "international arts community" (*guoji yishu shequ*) and a "tourism town" (*liuyou xiaozhen*), creating a "world urban art region" in the ranks of London's South Bank and New York's SoHo (Administrative Office of Dafen Oil Painting Village, 2018).

Materialized through acts of planning and new-build developments, the production of a gentrified landscape in Dafen proceeded in tandem with the extending territorial reach of the state. To begin with, the local

state advanced spatial control through physical interventions in Dafen's landscape. In 2005, the development of Dafen into a cultural cluster became a city-level project and was incorporated into Shenzhen's Eleventh Five-Year Plan. Deploying its planning authority, the government at the municipal, district and sub-district levels injected 13 million yuan in the 2000s to carry out demolition and renovation works around the village. The Leading Group of Dafen Village Environmental Remaking was set up to carry out basic makeovers. Roads were paved with tiles, the sewage channel was replaced with an underground pipe, and the exterior of buildings at the centre of Dafen was repainted in pastel colours to give the village the ambience of a continental European town (Fig. 1). Transplanting what it perceived to be the street-side café style of European towns, the local state further invested 2 million yuan to remake a dilapidated lane into a pedestrian area. Named "Coffee Street", the new pedestrian area featured boutique cafes and shops targeted at middle-class consumption by urbanites and tourists.

The state also countered villagers' private territorial claims by re-conceptualising Dafen as a "public art space" (*gonggong yishu kongjian*). This state-promoted rhetoric was actualized in practice by the remaking of villagers' buildings into public architecture that is open to public use. Overcoming initial protests from villagers, four old buildings situated at what became the new entrance to Dafen were taken down and a 6,000-square-metre open-air art square was built. The square became the permanent home of the newly built Dafen Art Museum, a 100-million-yuan construction designed by a local architectural firm. According to Meng Yan, the head architect, the museum and public square were designed to demonstrate an outward-looking orientation that opens up the space for participation from the wider public.

The relabeling of what was land owned by villagers as "public space" both legitimates and facilitates new-build developments. In contrast to traditional gentrification, where disinvested neighbourhoods are rehabilitated by middle-class homebuyers and landlords, new-build gentrification is made up of large, newly constructed commercial and residential complexes built on brownfield sites or on land vacated by the demolition of low-income neighbourhoods (Cameron, 2003; Davidson and Lees, 2005). In Dafen, the demolition of dilapidated village apartments as well as industrial buildings such as factories and plants made way for new kinds of capital reinvestment in high-value real estate projects and public architecture.

In 2018, the Longgang government began the construction of Shenzhen Dafen Oil Painting Cultural Industry Park, a project spanning an area of 125,000 square meters (Fig. 2). The park is to be built on an industrial area inside Dafen village, the previous site of factories and plants. This 100,000-square-meter area of industrial land use is being demolished to make way for new-build developments including an oil painting creation centre, exhibition exchange centre, art museum, and hotels for incoming tourists. Linked to the art-related development is a neighbourhood-scale real estate project spanning 285,000 square meters. Named Mumianwan, the project includes commercial developments as well as luxury housing estates aimed at attracting middle-class urbanites. When completed, the two land use areas would form a profitable arrangement where the lucrative conjoining of cultural economy and high-value real estate would create gentrified landscapes that enable elevated levels of rent to be generated.

The involvement of property developers through large-scale investment of economic capital has been commonly observed in new-build gentrification (Davidson and Lees, 2005). In Dafen's case, the local state actively solicited the participation of corporate actors to achieve its territorial objectives. The Mumianwan project is developed by Kingkey Real Estate, a renowned Shenzhen-based company that has also assisted the Shenzhen government in undertaking another prominent redevelopment project in Caiwuwei that involved the resumption of state control over land previously owned by village collectives.

The remaking of Dafen's rural and industrial structures into a gentrified landscape brought changes to the neighbourhood composition.

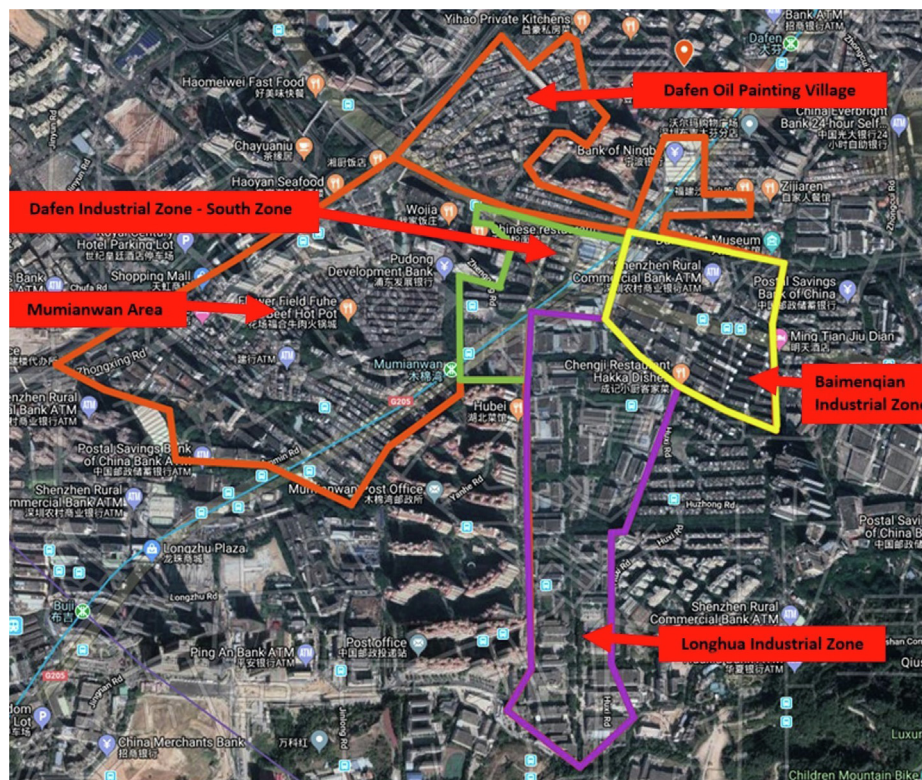


Fig. 2. Map view of Dafen's development. Based on figure produced by Administrative Office of Dafen Oil Painting Village, 2018.

The in-migration of artists has increased and the village now hosts about 1,200 galleries and a total of 8,000 painters and art workers. In contrast to the earlier wave of in-migration in the 1990s, the new incoming group consists of more high-paid artists engaged in original creation as well as business owners and art dealers, rather than low-wage art workers specializing in the labour-intensive production of copy paintings. The change in Dafen's cultural economy from one centred on production towards one aimed at encouraging tourism and consumption has also brought in tourists, as well as a rising population of middle-class urbanites who will soon inhabit the luxury residential complexes built on Dafen's land.

7. Extending territorial control through regulatory power

Landscape gentrification has enabled the state to resume planning control in Dafen, and is concomitant with the expansion of the state's regulatory presence. As creator and regulator of land rights and property titles, the state creates those laws and institutions that regulate land use and prescribe what can and cannot be done within designated boundaries. It does so by establishing a territorial administration that defines rights and assigns ownership to individuals and groups, and by deploying regulations and laws that give legal recognition to certain claims over land while rendering other uses and users unlicensed (Rasmussen and Lund, 2018). Once the boundaries of what constitutes appropriate and lawful usage is established, the state can then mobilize its means of enforcement – including the use of coercion to police, evict and displace – to elicit compliance and secure control.

In Dafen, territorial state-building was supported by the institutionalization of bureaucratic organizations equipped with the resources and powers to carry out state tasks. From 2004 onwards, the Longgang government set up a series of management organizations in Dafen. The Administrative Office, which reports to the sub-district government, was responsible for overseeing the overall development, promotion and market regulation of art industries in Dafen. The Dafen Joint Stock Cooperation and Property Management Company was set

up based on the former villagers' committee and provided a vehicle for villagers' investment and operation. A trio of cultural organizations, including Dafen Association of Art Industries, Dafen Artists Association and the local branch of the Chinese Communist Party and Communist Youth League for artists, were also established to monitor and supervise the cultural economy.

From the perspective of land use, the state's deployment of regulatory power in Dafen was most clearly observed in the disciplining of informality and the regulation of rent relations.

7.1. Disciplining informality

In conventional accounts of gentrification, local residents are often displaced from their neighbourhood as the in-migration of the middle class brought rent levels up beyond what original inhabitants could afford. The particular tenure system in post-socialist rural China, however, meant that villagers were not only able to remain *in situ*, but that they were able to profit handsomely from the gentrification of the village as well. Far from being the passive victims commonly theorized of local residents in accounts of gentrification, villagers displayed entrepreneurial agency in staking their material claims (Chen, 2016). Villagers were allowed to retain property rights over the apartments built on collective land, and this has allowed them, as rentiers, to become one of the biggest beneficiaries of Dafen's gentrification. While the government and property developers are producing new-build landscapes through large-scale capital investments, villagers are also engaged in smaller-scale reinvestment on a household basis – by refurbishing their apartments and maximizing the space for rent extraction.

As rent came to make up a significant part of their income, villagers sought to enlarge the space from which rent could be derived. Illegal additions were made to their apartments which violated the restrictions on plot size, height and construction floor space of villagers' private houses as stipulated by the state. Competition between rural households to appropriate rent, combined with a general disregard for public space,



Fig. 3. A wall gallery in Dafen. Author, 2012.

has contributed to the high-density, poorly coordinated living environments that are characteristic of Chinese urban villages.

Two widespread practices of informality in Dafen were the construction of so-called “wall galleries” and the illegal extension of storefront space. The former refers to the appropriation of building exteriors as private renting space. Confronted by increasing rent, some artists began using the outer walls of buildings as exhibition and working space (Fig. 3). They extended their display to building exteriors, turning the narrow passageway between two blocks into a kind of makeshift exhibition space adorned with paintings. Villager landlords capitalized on the opportunity and commoditized the exterior of buildings by charging rent by the square meter. Wooden or metal frames are put up on walls where artworks are hung, and shelters are placed above to shield paintings from sunshine and rain. While some are poorly maintained, others have become semi-permanent installations equipped with lighting and foldable screens to be shut and locked when the “galleries” close. Prior to government intervention there were some two hundred wall galleries in Dafen as villagers widely adopted the practice to rent out their walls. Another strategy attempted by villagers to maximize rent was the enlargement of storefront space. Villagers extended their shops outwards by using glass panels to enclose the space between their store and the pedestrian walkway, and the addition of floor area enabled them to charge more rent from tenants.

Villagers’ private claims challenged state control and compromised the government’s aim of opening up Dafen as a public space. In both instances, the state condemned the constructions as “illegal encroachment on public space” (*weifa zhanyong gonggong kongjian*) and outlawed the practices. Prior to the mega-event Universiade Shenzhen in 2011, formal notification was given to villager landlords by the sub-district government’s law enforcement team to take down the wall galleries. Tenants complained that “there was no room for negotiation” and that their stores were forcefully demolished (Interview, January 2013). In 2012, before Shenzhen was due to host another mega-event, villagers

were further instructed to remove the glass enclosures which were deemed to be in violation of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone City Image and Environmental Hygiene Regulations. In 2017, the government launched a campaign called “removing the nails” (*bading*) targeting illegally constructed wall galleries. More recently, the outbreak of a fire in a wall gallery has caused officials to renew its campaign targeting illegal constructions (Fieldwork, 2019).

The state’s high-profile attempt to enforce spatial discipline effectively prevented the continued proliferation of villagers’ informal practices, but it has not resulted in their disappearance. Interviewees suggested that the government adopts a “one eye open, one eye shut” attitude towards illegal constructions. The prevalence of informality does not necessarily signal state weakness: thriving business, after all, was mutually beneficial for both the state and villagers. It can be argued that state power is exercised here through periodic interventions, with the government adopting an accommodating position in general but selectively manifesting its authority by intervening to admonish and punish.

7.2. Regulating rent relations

The cooptation and formalization of the cultural economy by the state bolstered its regulatory presence not only as the arbiter of land rights but also as the arbitrator in disputes between villager-landlords and tenants. Dafen’s gentrification is reflected in increased rent, which has contributed to the gradual displacement of artists especially workers engaged in low-value imitation art production.

It is estimated that rent in Dafen could be twice as expensive compared with that in another urban village a five-minute walking distance away. Villager-landlords are unwilling to sign long-term contracts with tenants, as short-term tenancy allows them to increase rent more flexibly. Interviews with artists and business owners reveal significant hikes in rent. For a multi-storey, 100-square-meter gallery in Laowei West Lane, rent has gone up from 6,000 yuan in 2005 to 100,000 yuan in 2012, increasing over tenfold in eight years. In 2011, the landlord demanded that an additional 700 yuan be charged for the six-square-metre outer wall of the gallery which, according to the owner, was not used as an exhibition space then (Interview, January 2012). Mr Wang, an artist who has worked at Dafen for twenty years, informed the author that the increase in rent has accelerated since the mid-2000s, rising over tenfold in seven years (Interview, May 2012). As one of the few creative artists in Dafen, he must make copies aside from original artworks to make ends meet. Tenancy contracts are usually renewed on an annual basis, with yearly rental increments (Interview, July 2018). However, some landlords demand increases every half a year. One businessowner even saw his rent increased by 100 yuan a month, with an annual increment of 1,200 yuan (Interview, February 2019).

The growth of an active subletting market in Dafen has driven rent levels up even further. Most of Dafen’s indigenous villagers no longer live in the village, though this is not due to classical processes of displacement. Instead, as landlords, many have moved into an adjacent, newly-built neighbourhood called Dafen New Village, while others have moved out entirely or migrated to cities like Hong Kong. These villagers handed over their apartments to secondary landlords, or rented them out to outsiders who then sublet the stores and apartments to artists and vendors (Interview, May 2018). The prevalence of subletting through intermediaries meant that tenants are made to pay even higher levels of rent (Interview, July 2018).

Businesses that fail to stay afloat due to rent increase charge large sums of transfer fees in handing over their tenancy to prospective vendors. One owner revealed that while she paid a transfer fee of 80,000 yuan in 2005 for her current store, she has been made an offer of 278,000 yuan in 2012. In 2012, the transfer fee for a 25-square-metre store stood at 50,000 yuan, while that for a 50-square-metre store lied between 85,000 to 100,000 yuan. Fieldwork in 2018 showed that

transfer fee has gone up to 180,000 yuan for one 25-square-meter store (Interview, July 2018). In addition to paying hefty transfer fees, interviewees suggested that some landlords have begun demanding referral fees – known colloquially as “tea money” (*hecha fei*) – an arbitrary charge for giving the lease to specific tenants. It is reported that such fees can go up to tens of thousands of yuan (Interview, June 2018).

Rental relations are a source of persistent tension between villager-landlords and the artist community. Artists and business owners interviewed generally complained about rent and the villagers’ lack of contribution to Dafen’s development. A retired art teacher who has opened a store in Dafen said, “They are villagers and farmers, the only thing that matters to them is money. They don’t know how to manage the arts and are not cultured. All they do is to extract rent” (Interview, December 2018). A storeowner who has been at Dafen for eight years said, “All the villagers care about is how much rent will increase tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. They have no contribution, it is all the art workers’ contribution” (Interview, February 2019). “They are the biggest beneficiaries,” said another business owner. “We are in effect working for the villagers, because a large proportion of our income goes to them” (Interview, February 2019). In 2011, protests erupted amongst the artist community following the eviction of a tenant by his landlord due to rent disputes, where the landlord allegedly hired a group of men to trash the tenant’s possessions, including paintings worth more than 100,000 yuan (Interviews, September 2011). The artist community petitioned to the government and appealed for its intervention as arbitrator of landlord-tenant disputes.

The displacement pressure of high rent on the artist community provided both the impetus and rationale for the state to further reclaim territorial control from the villagers. The Longgang government reclaimed land from the village to build an Oil Painting Trading Square, a retail space with a construction floor area of 5,000 square meters that allows artists and business owners to rent stores. The first two stories of the building were developed into public rental apartments for accommodation. According to tenants, rental contracts in the Trading Square are directly managed by the government and are signed with tenants at lower prices and for longer rental periods (Interviews, May and December 2018). The government further invested in the construction of a 16-storey public rental apartment block with 268 flats, built specifically for the accommodation of artists. By creating alternative sites with state-controlled rent, the state successfully brought part of Dafen’s informal rental economy under state management and expanded its regulatory presence.

8. Displacement and the class dynamics of gentrification

Early studies of gentrification have observed how the influx of middle-class residents in working class neighbourhoods contributed to the displacement of their original occupants (Glass, 1964; Smith, 1982). More recent studies suggest however that gentrification could occur without widespread displacement as a significant concern (Boddy, 2007; Butler, 2007; Lambert and Boddy, 2002). Rather than via direct and overt means, displacement could take place through indirect, exclusionary processes (Marcuse, 2010). For instance, gradual declines in affordability and the progressive reorientation of services in gentrified neighbourhoods could eventually drive out original inhabitants in the long term (Davidson, 2008). Changes in the cultural outlook of gentrifying communities to adapt to tastes in consumption can also be seen as a form of cultural displacement (Zhao, 2019).

At China’s rural-urban interface, the unique land tenure system has engendered distinctive class dynamics and patterns of displacement. To begin with, due to their territorial presence and pre-existing rights as collective owners of rural land, Dafen’s villagers were able to hold on to the property rights over their housing apartments and use them as instruments of rent extraction. They faced no immediate prospect of direct displacement and were able to reap monetary benefits from the gentrification process. Using the rent appropriated, villagers

rehabilitated their apartments and made additional constructions to cater to demand from the incoming migrants. Two parallel class-relational processes have thus been unfolding in Dafen: on the one hand, the in-migration of the art community has brought a new population to the neighbourhood; on the other hand, in-migration has itself been a class-making process for the local community, as it has enriched local residents and turned them into a class of petit landlords and gentrifiers. The ability of villagers to stay put points to the state’s particular strategy of state building in the Dafen case – while it periodically intervenes to discipline, the government has chosen to extend its territorial control not by the coercive expulsion of local villagers, but by co-opting them and the cultural economy they helped foster.

Villagers’ relatively secure place in the gentrifying neighbourhood stands in contrast to that of the artist community. Within the art community, patterns of stratification and differentiation are drawn along class lines. As Dafen transitioned from mass painting production towards high-value cultural consumption, so-called “low-end” art workers are being squeezed out. By 2012, Dafen had lost half of its art workers (South Reviews, 2018). The sanction of “illegal” wall galleries by the government has further threatened the livelihood of some 500 tenants, the majority of them art workers with lower income who were unable to rent proper stores and could only afford small wall gallery spaces (Fieldwork 2013; Mingpao Canada, 2017). Replacing these art workers is a growing class of high-earning artists, gallerists and business owners who have the financial means to operate in Dafen. Painters of original artwork can make up to tens of thousands of yuan per painting. By 2016, some three hundred original painters have moved into Dafen. Of the 20,000 art-related personnel in Dafen, 70% are engaged in oil painting and associated retail, 10% in Chinese art and associated retail, 12% in the sale of art supplies, and 8% in decorative arts (Shenzhen Special Zone Daily, 2016).

The change in the composition of the incoming population shows not only the invisible hand of the market but also the visible hand of the state. As the government strives to turn Dafen into an international cultural cluster, it is redefining the kinds of population it seeks to retain. The district government has introduced schemes such as rent waiver and the conferment of local household registration to attract the “right” kinds of talent (Wang and Li, 2017). For example, painters engaged in original creation can rent studios at subsidized rates and be granted expedited processing in housing applications (Southern Weekly, 2018). By offering selective support to groups deemed desirable, the state is actively directing and choreographing the class remake of Dafen.

Villagers in neighbourhoods adjacent to Dafen are also facing direct and indirect forms of displacement. The spread of gentrifying processes from Dafen has enabled the state to reclaim land occupied by urban villages through the demolition of neighbourhoods. As of the second half of 2018, the government has already signed eviction agreements with over 1,800 households in the Mumianwan project, or 55% of the 3,300 households to be displaced (Longgang government, 2018). The new-build residential estates are bringing property prices in the vicinity up, with the district seeing an annual increase of almost 20% as a whole (Leju, 2017). Looking ahead, the extension of gentrification processes from Dafen can be expected to bring about the large-scale displacement and resettlement of populations living in Longgang’s urban villages, further allowing the state to extend its territorial reach into the rural-urban fringe.

9. Conclusion

This paper draws attention to an understudied dimension of gentrification by emphasizing the territorial nature of political power. Going beyond conventional narratives of state-led gentrification, which often focus on the revenue imperative of neoliberal and developmental states, it treats the state as a territorial entity with the capacity to project power over distance. The need to consolidate territorial control compels the state to deploy spatial strategies with the aim of defending

its jurisdictional boundaries and materializing its nominal land rights. By “grounding” the analysis, this paper thus proposes the conceptualization of gentrification as a state-making strategy.

The remaking of Chinese urban villages has long been examined by urban studies scholars under the rubric of “regeneration” and “renewal”. These same expressions, however, are often deployed by governments and private capital “to package their actions in value-neutral terms” in mobilizing support for redevelopment projects (Shin et al., 2016, p. 460). Analyzing these processes through the lens of gentrification highlights instead how redevelopment is often accompanied by both direct and indirect forms of displacement. As a critical perspective, gentrification theory propels researchers to observe the socio-spatial inequalities and contestations that redevelopment produces (López-Morales, 2015).

The use of gentrification as an analytical framework furthermore allows comparative insights to be derived. Specifically, this paper made three main observations. First, unlike the Western context where privatized tenure regimes are predominant, informality and non-privatized property rights have extensive presence in the Global South (Roy, 2005; Ghertner, 2015). In post-socialist economies, the fuzziness of property adds an important territorial dimension to the state’s gentrification agenda. As shown in the case study of a Chinese village, the bifurcation of land ownership due to socialist legacy and the vagueness of land rights post-expropriation have created overlapping claims and territorial contestations between state and societal actors at the rural-urban interface. Informality has further created room for bottom-up agency and entrepreneurialism amongst villagers in staking their territorial claims. Comparative studies of gentrification thus need to account for how variegated property rights regimes might produce different dynamics of gentrification, especially in places outside of the Global North.

Secondly, attention to territorial processes and the politics of land implies extending gentrification analysis beyond market-centred accounts. While the earlier scholarship on gentrification has been critiqued for focusing on demand-side approaches emphasizing cultural factors or supply-side ones emphasizing economic forces (Redfern, 1997), it is important to highlight the political and territorial dimensions of gentrification. This paper centre-staged the role of the state and demonstrated that while the fiscal imperative created by neoliberal conditions is important, gentrification is also about consolidating the territorial reach of the state and is as such part and parcel of ongoing processes of state building.

A third observation made in this paper concerns displacement and its class dynamics. It is shown that although the state’s co-optation of local villagers means that the direct displacement of original residents might not be an immediate outcome, gentrification-induced displacement can also take place through more gradual and indirect processes. In Dafen’s case, these effects can be seen in the displacement of low-income art workers engaged in mass painting production as a result of elevated rent, as well as the knock-on effect that Dafen’s gentrification has in displacing village communities in surrounding neighbourhoods. These findings support arguments that it is necessary and instructive to go beyond the immediate time-space horizon when examining the class impact of gentrification (Shin et al., 2016).

Together, these findings shed light on some of the nuances that the study of gentrification processes outside of Western realities and urban confines might demonstrate. As López-Morales (2018, p. 49) argues, gentrification “is at the heart of the tensions generated by planetary urbanization, namely, the expansion – both territorial and epistemological – of urbanization as a normalizing process across the earth”. The planetary nature of urbanization implies that a comparative perspective is urgently called for in exploring how observations in the rural and peri-urban areas of the Global South might inform theorization of gentrification as a global strategy. By examining a case study of post-socialist gentrification and state building at the rural-urban interface, this paper seeks to take a step in that direction.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Karita Kan: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing, Visualization, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

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Appendix A. Supplementary material

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